

PRE-GREECE

LAC Leonard W “Abbie” Abbs, 211 Sqdn, Royal Air Force

Born in Norwich in 1920, Len joined the Royal Air Force in July 1938.



Len, El Dabaa, 1940 (LW Abbs)

From 211 Squadron Operations Log Book (EL Dabaa, Egypt):

“22/3/1940 A new draft consisting of 44 airmen of various trades arrived from the United Kingdom.”

Letter from Len: 8 – 4 – 2001 (Egypt & Palestine)

[(Some of) Len’s . . . thoughts on the Middle East campaign]

[...] “When 211 were at El Dabaa, the British High Command permitted the Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, to enlist and serve with the ME Forces. We had some thirty join our Squadron. I do believe the Powers That Be thought the two factions would unite to serve the common cause. Wishful thinking, for in the mess at meal times Jews would sit one side of the building and Arabs the other.

El Dabaa was situated on a cliff-top where there were built sand-bagged machine-gun posts. On the outer perimeter were Egyptian heavy Ack Ack positions who incidentally were a bloody nuisance for at times they fired on our returning planes. Luckily their accuracy was never good. Manning our machine gun posts were the Palestinians. In charge of them was Swede Revit (sic Revett). I got to chat with Swedie because of his accent. On our first meet I said “I bet you come from Norfolk, Bor!” I was wrong, he came from Suffolk: near enough, another friendship was born. Coming from East Anglia we were known as Swedes or Turnips.”



Len Abbs (left) and Swede Revett (right) (Fryatt collection)
The dust of the desert on their boots as they stand by their tent for a snap.
One of the favourite spots for informal shots with mates.

“The war never commenced in the Middle East until June 10th 1940. I started my service there in March when things were quiet. The evenings there were beautiful. I find it hard to explain, there was a stillness, a hush. So hard to believe that at the time I speak of, Gerry was knocking hell out of London. We would sit on top of the sandbags and chat, one to the other. There I met Isaac [Baruch] who was born in Jerusalem. He spoke 5 languages and fascinated me. He also enlightened me of the situation in Palestine, Jew v Arab, with the good old British Tommy in the middle. [...] Palestine under the League of Nations terms was a British Protectorate. One evening Isaac told me he had got 14 days leave and was going home. He said “Come with me, Abbie”. I said how I would love to but I can’t see the CO granting me leave. Surprise, surprise I did get leave and I travelled with Isaac, 36 hour train journey to Palestine.

Isaac’s father was a Rabbi originally from Russia, his wife from Spain. Their eldest son was Aaron, who was imprisoned by the British Army for breaking the curfew and carrying a firearm. This long after I stayed with them and he was released when they gained their independence. Aaron was married to Rachael, they had a baby girl. Also there they [the parents] had four girls, 16, 14, 13, 9 [years] of age. We left the train at Tel Aviv and caught a coach to Jerusalem. Waiting for us at Jerusalem was Isaac’s brother Aaron and one of his younger sisters. After our welcome the girl ran on ahead. Arriving at the house, the Baruch family were lined up to meet us. In a line Mum, Dad and children, also Aaron’s wife Rachael with baby. I thought how beautiful the girls were. I was 19 years of age and was embarrassed by their greeting. Isaac’s father in perfect English said “Welcome to our home, Abbie, we intend to make your stay a happy one”. Boy was it a happy one I looked back [on] over the years. I treasure the memory not only of the pleasure but also of what they taught me. [...] When Isaac introduced me they thought he said “Happy” so to them I was always “Happy”. It was so appropriate [...] The house they lived in was [on] top of a hill, five bedrooms on the ground floor which was much cooler for sleeping. We spent the time upstairs when we were not visiting the sights, we played cards, danced to tunes on the gramophone. I flatter myself I was in great demand. I had learnt my dancing at the Hercules and Samson Ballroom, Norwich, right opposite its famous cathedral.

Aaron worked for the governing party. He was a very intelligent man. He knew more of British history than I did. Also he was a likeable person. He and his wife took me to places of interest mentioned in our Bible. Also I lay in the Dead Sea, cannot say swam: impossible to swim.

I left Jerusalem with heavy heart. So impressed by how the Jews had taken the desert and converted it to fertile land. Orchards of oranges and grapefruit everywhere. At the time I was there with the War on they were unable to export so you just helped yourself. Another thing I remember was the Jews building everywhere. Jews employing Arab labour. Jews and Arabs on the building sites joking, laughing with each other. I remember Aaron saying it is [only] the Arab leaders jealous of how we have changed the desert [...]

Isaac and I returned to El Dabaa. Italy had declared war 10 June 1940. Not so many fun and games now. Our visits to the sea less. These beaches on the coast of North Africa were something to be remembered. Not sand: very, very fine particles where the sea over the centuries had broken the rock down.[...]

[Runway sweeping: a dawn venture, to explode booby traps dropped by Italian aircraft over night] Usually four airmen walked in front. John drove [...] Klocker exploded the offending missiles of which there were many. Fortunately there were no casualties during these dawn adventures. The Ities ceased dropping them after a month. We endured several bombing raids however. Each tent's occupants dug their own slit trench air raid shelter. They were very effective about 6 feet deep and narrow. The only casualties were if you were in there first and some clown jumped in on top of you. The Ities were not that good. Invariably above 10,000 feet and shit-scared of our Gladiator fighter patrols. We always knew through message passed along the line when they were coming and our fighters would be waiting. I never did know how this worked. I suspected the Bedouins who roamed the desert respecting no frontiers and were paid by both sides.

At El Dabaa we had a canteen hut. There was no NAAFI in North Africa but there was the good old Salvation Army, the Church Army and yes, in the towns, the Women's Institute. On our camp was a hut run by a Church Army Captain, he too had served in 1st World War. Another lovable plump bald headed character. We had a table tennis table, dart boards, cards, chess, draughts, etc and a library of paperbacks. Amazingly, while in Blighty my Mum could not buy a tin of salmon, we could buy salmon sandwiches by the score, also eggs and bread.

One evening we were playing table tennis in the Church Army canteen when the rocket went up. I do mean literally went up, for reasons I or my comrades never understood they used to fire a rocket as a warning of an impending air raid. To me it was like saying here we are come and hit us. [...] We rushed out and sought shelter. As usual they fell all around us. On the All Clear we sauntered back to our game. Entering the hut there was our Captain clearing up and wiping down the tables I said "Captain, one of these days they will hit this hut". He replied "It will be God's will, my son." When I was a PoW I used to lay there and think of those times. It was God's will there were such people as the Captain. He thought only of our comfort. No mention in despatches for such as them.

My friend Isaac [Baruch] the Palestinian, when we arrived in Greece, got transferred to the Air Stores Park, several miles from us the other side of Athens, so I saw little of him for months. Then one of those strange quirks of fate. I was sitting at the roadside in Kalamata wondering would I be one of those lucky ones to get away. A lorry stopped near us full of airmen. Voice shouted "Abbie, here, here!" I ran to the lorry as it pulled away. It was Isaac. He shouted "Abbie, go to my home." As previously mentioned I made it back to Egypt. At RAF camp Abu Sueir we were issued a complete new kit of clothing and posted to Lydda Airport, Palestine."

Photos from Len

With his Middle East . . . narrative told, and with 211 safely working up as 72 OTU, here is a convenient point to leave Len's Letters and turn instead to (some of) his photographs (- of the Pre-Greece period -), kindly shared by Len with Adrian Fryatt, and by Adrian for use here (211 Squadron.org).



Walter Gibson 1921—1944 (LW Abbs)

Taken at El Dabaa, 12 March 1940. Walter “Gibbie” Gibson died of dysentery in Fukuoka, Japan in January 1944 aged 23 years. In 1947, Len and Betty spent their honeymoon in the cottage where Walter had been born.



Len and Isaac Baruch of Palestine, El Dabaa, 1940 (LW Abbs)

Sources

211 Squadron Operations Record Book 1937 TNA AIR 27/1302, TNA AIR 27/1303
Abbs LW Photograph collection 1940-1942, correspondence
RAF Chaplains Branch correspondence via A Fryatt:
Java FEPOW 1942 Club *Prisoners in Java* Hamwic 2007
Rorke SJ *Greatness of Heart* Family Publications 1988
The Tablet journal, *Periscope* obituary Fr Rorke, 15 September 1990 issue
RAF Chaplains Branch *Annual Review 2007—2008*